LOVE BETRAYED

March 27, 1988, Palm Sunday

9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Zechariah 9:9-10
Matthew 21:1-14
Matthew 26:14-25, 27:1-5

"And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him, one after another, 'Is it I, Lord?'" -Matthew 26:22 (RSV)

For urbane, worldly, sophisticates such as you and me, this is getting awfully messy.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian in the last century said, "remove from Christianity its ability to shock... and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny, superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them." [See William Willimon, On A Wild And Windy Mountain, p. 65]

We don't want to be shocked, of course, particularly on Sunday morning. There are shocks enough in life. There have been more rude jolts to our equilibrium recently than any of us needs. What we do need is some stability and reassurance, some sanctuary from the relentless unpredictability of the life we live. But - "remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it becomes a tiny, superficial thing."

Well, the events the Christian world commemorates this week are shocking. Things got out of control week, long ago when Jesus and his small band of followers decided to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem.

It is so chaotic that we don't know how to feel. We are drawn to one side, then the other. Contending themes compete for our attention: triumph and tragedy, victory and disaster, heroes and villains, devotion and betrayal. And the one character in which all of these themes are expressed, by far the most enigmatic person in the whole story is Judas Iscariot, the one of the twelve who betrayed him.

Just last week there was a news item which illustrated how complex the topic of betrayal is. Apparently one of the "saints" of the Stalinist era in Russia is a young boy by the name of Pavlik Morozov whose statue stands in Moscow's Children's Park. He has been glorified as a model communist in stories and school books since the '30s. What Pavlik did was betray his father. His father was accused of passing false documents to relatives. Young Pavlik testified against his father in court, denounced

him as a traitor. For fifty years the boy has been regarded as a wonderful example of Marxist loyalty. But today in Russia there is a remarkable movie about the incident that is actually talking about the terrible poignancy and inhumanity in the story. What was once seen as an act of high moral courage is now seen as a misguided tragedy at best, and a betrayal at worst.

The fact is that betrayal is not as simple as it seems. My guess is that most betrayals happen for what seem like pretty good reasons at the moment. One time the mother of an elementary school friend of mine took me into her confidence. She told me that my friend was going to receive a Lionel Electric Train for Christmas - and that I was not to tell. In that he and I invested a fair amount of time talking about what we might be getting for Christmas, and whether or not it might be a Lionel - and in that, when left alone in either of our houses, we had looked in every closet, under every bed, in every hat box, for some shred of evidence - I thought it was a pretty good idea to end his agony and tell him; which is what I did. He went home and told her; she called me - and told me I had betrayed her and ruined Christmas for my friend. Now that was forty years ago and I've learned enough about human nature and about parenting to know that she shouldn't have told a ten year old that secret under those conditions. I doubt very much whether lasting damage was done to my friend. But I do still think about it.

The complexity of betrayal is explored brilliantly in a Jean Paul Sartre short story, The Wall. Sartre's premise is that life is essentially absurd and that the worst betrayals are sometimes unintentional. In The Wall, a political prisoner has been tried and sentenced to death. He summons the courage to defy his captors one last time. He will do it, he decides, by making them look foolish. His captors had offered to reprieve him if he would betray the leader of the resistance movement of which he is a member. Under torture and interrogation he had not revealed anything. But now, in defiant courage, he reports to the office of the commandant that he has changed his mind. He knows where the man is hiding. It is a tool shed in a cemetery. The tale is so unlikely that his captors are very suspicious. A squad of soldiers is dispatched. The prisoner returns to his cell to await his execution, enjoying the thought of the soldiers looking for the fugitive in a tool shed. How foolish they will feel!

Then guards come to his cell. It must be the end. Instead he is taken to the yard, to enjoy the sun. He inquires of another prisoner... what has happened. "Nothing much," the man replies, "except that they finally caught up with him, found him in a tool shed in a cemetery. Executed him on the spot."

Sometimes, the great existentialist was saying, betrayals happen for what seem to be good motives. In fact, betrayal can happen without the betrayer ever knowing it. Thus, that haunting question at the table of the Last Supper, "Is it I, Lord?" Jesus had just announced that one of them was going to betray him. What they should have said, what we expect them to say, is "Not me, I won't do it." But they ask, one at a time, "Is it I?" A peculiar question unless you can betray someone without knowing that you are doing it. That possibility is what is, to me, so enigmatic and so fascinating and so relevant about the story of Judas.

Jesus had decided to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He had gone out of his way to enter the city in the very way the prophet Zechariah said the Messiah would come. It was for him an act of high intentionally and fateful consequence. The disciples understood it and are appropriately astonished and afraid. The crowds of people who have come to Jerusalem are there to celebrate a great patriotic occasion, the liberation of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They are not, at the moment, free. They are under the heel of Rome. In that situation Jesus' act is highly provocative and they, the crowd, act predictably. They start acting like the King has come. The revolution is starting.

200 years earlier, Jerusalem had been liberated from a cruel, foreign tyrant - in the Macabbean revolt. There was a great celebration. Here is how it is described:

> "...the Jews entered Jerusalem
> with praise and palm branches,
> and with hymns and songs
> because a great enemy had been
> crushed." [I Maccabees, 13:51]

That was what was on the mind of those people who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. It is what makes this day so complex. It also sheds light on what Judas did.

He betrayed Jesus, and my suggestion is that his betrayal probably sounded like a good idea. In fact to dismiss Judas as an absolutely evil man, as history has done to him, probably misses the reality - both of the man and of what he did. Jesus had chosen him, along with the other eleven three years earlier. There was something in Judas that appealed to Jesus.

He was a Judean in the midst of eleven Galileans; one northerner and all the rest southerners. He became treasurer for the small group. When they traveled it would have been Judas who arranged for places to stay and meals to eat. One time, when a woman emptied out a bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus, in an act of lovely extravagance, it was Judas who objected. With level-headed common sense, he said that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor - an admirable position, actually.

You know what he did. After the triumphant entry to Jerusalem, Judas went to the Temple officials who intended to get rid of Jesus as quickly as possible. He offered to lead them to him and identify him for the purposes of arrest. To seal the bargain he was given thirty pieces of silver. So Judas left the upper room where they were eating their last supper, met the Temple guards and took them to the garden where Jesus was praying. There, probably in order to prevent a quick substitution by one of Jesus' friends, he identified Jesus in the way customary for disciple and Rabbi, a kiss.

Why do you suppose he did that? How could he? It surely wasn't the money - although it is amazing what people will do for a few dollars; how many families have been ruptured over the distribution of a few thousand

dollars from grandfather's estate. It has been suggested that he was passionately patriotic; perhaps even a member of the Zealots, an underground revolutionary political party devoted to independence for Israel. The Zealots successfully harassed the Romans, using classic guerrilla tactics. They loved Zechariah's description of the King coming to the city and they knew what that King would do. He would kick out the Romans, re-establish the monarchy and assume the throne of David. When the Messiah came, the Zealots would be there to fight, shoulder to shoulder, man to man, with him.

Perhaps Judas assumed that when Jesus entered the city and went straight to the Temple, he was actually starting the revolution. And when he didn't - when instead of encouraging insurrection, Jesus sat down and talked to the sick people and the blind people, and then turned around and went back to Bethany for the night - Judas felt betrayed. The moment he had waited for, worked for, prayed for, day and night for three years, had come and gone, slipped through his fingers. In profound disappointment, perhaps rage, Judas struck at the one he believed had betrayed him, with a lot of brave rhetoric about the Kingdom and then at the last minute he lost his nerve.

That seems to me a very plausible and very human possibility. I can understand that... It doesn't take a categorically evil person to think like that. And it could have been even more complex. It has been proposed that Judas thought Jesus himself was waiting for the right moment: that Jesus was watching and waiting to see if any of his friends had the courage and heart for real conflict. Perhaps Jesus was waiting for someone to set up a situation in which his hand would be forced and he would have reason to respond with strength and mobilize the popular following which was clearly in the mood for some action. This is the saddest and in many ways most poignantly human possibility - that Judas left the upper room not knowing that he was the betrayer; instead thinking that he was the only one who really understood. How else to explain the most forlorn sentence in the Bible... "When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented"? Does that mean what it says? That Judas didn't know how it would turn out? That Judas didn't mean for it to turn out this way? That Judas thought he was the only one with courage enough to act decisively, suddenly realizing that he was responsible for Jesus' death? It's the most forlorn incident in the Bible: "He brought back the thirty pieces of silver - saying - 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.'" They said, "What is that to us?" And throwing down the pieces of silver in the Temple, he departed: and he went and hanged himself."

Now it does occur to me that we make Judas into the worst scoundrel in all of history to avoid confronting the truth that what he did was appallingly human. Who doesn't know something about that?

On this day of all days we ought to be able to see that Jesus was betrayed not so much by people who opposed him as by people who misunderstood him. It's a wonderful moment - all this spontaneity and praise, children singing, men and woman ripping branches off trees and the coats off their backs to lay them in his path and welcome him to the city as its true King. But the celebration must include the ones who badly misunderstood, the ones whose personal agendas were so powerful that they

insisted that he act in a way they preferred. It's a wonderful moment. But it must always include the reality that in the crowd were those who became so angry when he didn't act the way they wanted him to act, changed their mind; and five short days later screamed for his execution.

So I propose to you, that Palm Sunday is a day for celebration and joy but also for humility and honesty. It is, it seems to me, a day when we need to recall how difficult it has always been for well-meaning folk to allow him to be Lord on his terms. He would not be forced into the world's expectations. Nor should his church ever betray him by doing what he refused to do: by allowing the world to set the agenda to adapt the world's definitions of our purpose; to regard this enterprise as successful because it accumulates big numbers, big dollars. His Lordship is affirmed when we take seriously his agenda and follow him into the center of the city and become the loving, inclusive, forgiving and just community he intended. It is a day to remember that whenever we find ourselves accommodating: when the world says to us "just stick to religion and stay out of politics, economics, social issues." When that intimidates or influences us, we have betrayed him.

On this occasion we betray him if we forget where this day ended for him; if we forget that the triumphal entry ended not with a huge victory celebration, but with him sitting in the Temple dealing with the sick and lame and blind and with the crowd gone to other more exciting things. We stay with him this day when we recall that our task is to be there too: that our palm waving this morning is appropriately concluded when the homeless are sheltered and the hungry fed and the disturbed comforted and the lonely loved.

We betray him if we forget that this triumphant occasion results in Good Friday; that the way he could have avoided giving his life away was by remaining outside the city, by not coming in.

We betray him if we do not follow him this week to his cross. "When Christ calls a person he calls him to come and die," Dietrick Bonhoeffer said once. So we are called this week to allow him to lead us - not try to explain it away or even understand it, so much as simply to walk with him as he walks deliberately to his cross.

The real tragedy but also, paradoxically, the aspect of the story that contains grace, hope - i.e. Gospel - is that Jesus loved Judas too. The final tragedy is not Judas' betrayal but that he did not know that and the forgiveness that was its expression.

Jesus, being Jesus, never stopped loving Judas. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," he prayed for his executioners and taunters. Surely that most powerful prayer encompassed Judas in the lonely torment of his soul. Judas didn't have to take his life. Jesus would have given it back - healed, forgiven, whole, new born again.

The New Testament has Jesus calling Judas the "Son of Perdition." It was Martin Luther who understood that there is another way to translate "son of peridition," namely "lost son." And it was Luther who saw that Judas was just that - a lost child. Even this betrayer is, in Jesus' way

of thinking, not an unreedemable, hopeless wretch - but a child who has lost his way.

So - is there anyone who would not have to say to him, "Is it I, Lord?" Of course not.

The Gospel is that our betrayals, regardless of their dimensions, do not cause our Lord to stop loving us, nor do they need to condem us.

The Gospel is that our betrayals of God, others, and self, are not the final word about us. The assertion of Christianity is that there is a love big and strong enough to overcome even our betrayals.

Did Pavlik's father stop loving him? Probably not... When his son betrayed him, my guess is that the father grieved, was sad at how lost his son had become.

That's how parents are.

That's how God is -

And that is what the Cross is about...

Love...

Love betrayed.

But love strong enough to forgive and heal.

That is the Good News.

Hosanna!

So, with the church in all ages, let us say -

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"

Amen.